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THE MINISTRY OF THE LETTER, AND THE MINISTRY OF THE SPIRIT

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The Disciples' Pulpit.

Under this title there will be published once a month one of James Freeman Clarke's sermons. It is not proposed that the sermon published shall always be of most recent date; but the selection will be left to Dr. Clarke, and, so far as possible, special attention will be paid to the needs of the Post Office Missions.

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III. A Happy New Year.

IV. The Ministry of the Letter, and the Ministry of the Spirit.

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THE MINISTRY OF THE LETTER, AND THE MINISTRY OF THE SPIRIT.

"It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words I speak to you, they are spirit, and they are life."— ST. JOHN vi., 63.

"Who also hath made us able ministers of the New Covenant,— not of the letter, but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." II. COR. iii., 6.

THERE are two ways of reading the Bible. One way is to take everything literally; the other is to find and receive the spirit of the Bible. According to the doctrine of verbal inspiration, every word of the Bible is the word of God. According to the other view, it is the spirit of the Bible which is divine.

The theory of verbal inspiration requires us to assume that there are no errors or contradictions in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation; that every part is equally the word of God; that the minute directions in the Books of Leviticus and Numbers about lamps and silver trumpets, clean and unclean beasts, the law of divorce, boring a hole in a servant's ear, not suffering a witch to live,— that these all came directly from the Infinite Being, and have the same inspiration as the Sermon on the Mount. It is also necessary, on this theory, when we see an apparent error or a contradiction, to maintain that it is not one; to assert that, when David cursed his enemies, he was inspired to do this; that the world was created in six literal days; that God walked in the Garden, and repented that he had made man; that the whale swallowed Jonah; that he lived

three days and nights within the fish; and that, at the command of Joshua, the sun stood still,— that is, the diurnal revolution of the earth was suspended for an hour or two to enable the Jewish general to complete the destruction of his enemies.

But, when we read the Bible according to the spirit, all these things become matters of comparative indifference. We do not trouble ourselves about Jonah or Joshua, for that has nothing to do with faith in Christ. We leave the chaff and take the wheat; we drop the shell and eat the nut; we seek for what is true, and let alone the errors. We look for what is good, beautiful, lovely, inspiring, comforting, purifying, elevating. We accept Paul's saying that "every Scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

It is remarkable that the Christian Church has clung so tenaciously to the letter of Scripture, though Jesus himself, and his great apostle, Paul, have both distinctly declared that the spirit alone is life-giving. Take, for instance, the text from John: Jesus had called himself "the bread of life," "the living bread, which came from heaven," and added that this bread was his flesh, and that, unless they "ate the flesh of the son of man, and drank his blood, they would have no life in them." The Jews took this literally, and said, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" But Jesus explained to them that by bread and flesh and blood he meant his spirit. "It is the spirit that makes alive; the flesh profits nothing; the words I speak to you are spirit and life." It is the spirit and life in the words of Jesus, not chiefly their literal meaning, that profits us.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives to the people "the statutes and the laws which Jehovah commanded him to teach to them." Among these was the law of divorce. It was this: that, if any man wished to divorce his wife, for any reason, he might do it, provided he gave her a bill of divorcement to show that it was not because of any fault of hers. But Jesus refused

to sanction this doctrine that a man might divorce his wife when he chose, and says that Moses allowed it because he could not help himself. "Moses, for the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives; but, in the beginning, it was not so." He teaches here that this permission did not come from God, but from Moses, and did not have any divine inspiration in it. And yet it stands in the Bible as one of the commandments given by God to Moses. It is a part of the letter of the Bible, but no part of the spirit of the Bible.

The passage I have quoted from the Apostle Paul repeats even more emphatically the saying of Jesus. Paul declares that God has made him and his fellow-apostles "able ministers of the New Testament" (or New Covenant), "not of its letter, but of its spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." The New Covenant, therefore, like the old, has its letter and its spirit; and reliance on the letter kills the spirit.

In what way, you may ask, can the letter of the gospel kill the spirit of the gospel? Take some illustrations. When, relying on a text in Exodus, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (xxii., 18), Christians burned alive thousands of men and women, is it not evident that the letter of the Bible had killed in their hearts the spirit of the Bible? When Louis XIV., as a religious duty, and to put down false doctrine, and relying on such texts as "He that believeth not shall be damned," sent men, women, and children to the galleys for attending Protestant worship, and caused others to be tortured and hanged for the same offence; and when Bossuet called the king "the new Constantine" for these atrocities, and the Pope had "Te Deum" sung in St. Peter's to celebrate them; and the sprightly letter-writer, Mme. de Sévigné, wrote: "We are by no means dull here: hanging is quite a refreshment to me. They have just taken twenty or thirty of these men, and are about to turn them off," the men being hanged for attending Protestant meetings, is it not clear that the letter of belief had killed in such

souls the spirit of love? Would not Jesus have rebuked this Satanic zeal, as he did that of his disciples who asked him to cause lightning to come out of heaven to punish the inhospitality of some villages: "Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man has not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

Though the silent, unseen, but steady coming of Christ has put an end to such abominable cruelties as these, does not the ministry of the letter still neutralize the spirit of love in Christian denominations? What but this ministry of the letter prevents to-day the union for which Jesus prayed, and which, when it comes, will convert the world to him? One great denomination stands apart from the rest, clinging to its literal view of baptism as immersion. Another keeps aloof, calling itself "the Church," because of its faith in the letter about bishops. Others refuse to allow pious men to go as missionaries to the heathen or to be pastors and teachers, because they cherish a hope that the eternal Father may be more merciful to his children than Calvin allows or than the letter of a New Testament text seems to assert. And thus this servile trust in the letter opposes the spirit of Christ's last great prayer that all his disciples might be one, "as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that all may be one in us, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." O ye churches, which claim to be followers of Jesus, multiply your missionaries to the heathen by tens of thousands: you will never convert the world to your Master till you become one with each other in his spirit of love!

The Bible, because it is alive, has its spirit and its letter, its soul and its body. Everything that lives has its spirit and letter, its soul and body; and, while the body and the letter change and pass, the spirit only is life-giving and immortal.

It is not what a man says, not his professions, not his outward show and seeming, that make the real man. Back of these there is the spirit of the man. His words may be fair

and wise, his conduct, in appearance, irreproachable; but there is something false in his tone, something small and mean in his spirit, which indicates that he is not sound within. He is like a fair tree, hollow at heart; like a fair marble mausoleum, full of decay within. He has no root in honest conviction or sincere purpose, and in time of temptation will wither away. He has the letter of goodness, but not the spirit.

And, on the other hand, a man may seem outwardly an unbeliever, and may think himself opposed to Christ; he may be classed with publicans and sinners, and yet may have inwardly, and unconsciously to himself, the spirit of faith. While the French Government was still breaking men at the wheel and sending children to the galleys for being Protestants, and neither the French Church nor the French Academy, neither cultivated nor refined nor religious France had anything to say against it, one man stood up to rebuke this iniquity, and by his logic, his wit, his intense activity, his unfaltering zeal, finally and forever put an end to these persecutions. That man was Voltaire, the leading sceptic of his age. But I think that Jesus might have said to him, "Thou, too, knowest not what spirit thou art of; for, in this work, thou art my servant and my follower."

I read a book. Its doctrine is sound, its moral lessons unimpeachable: perhaps it is a story in which the bad people are punished and the good rewarded. But its spirit is cold and formal, there is no life or love in it; its tone is hard, caustic, dry. The letter is all right, but the good spirit is absent. The moral influence of such a book is low and poor.

I read another book. I may find fault with its incidents. The good have no outward rewards, nor the bad outward punishment. But the book interests me in what is pure, generous, noble. It makes me love right and hate wrong. It does not put black for white or white for black. It does not confound moral distinctions. It does not take for granted that

evil-doing is a matter of course, and cannot be helped; but it shows that we have a power and a freedom to do right, if we will. I call the moral influence of such a book good. Though its letter may be open to objection, its spirit and tone are inspiring and ennobling.

I hear a man pray. Every petition is scrupulously correct, no need of the soul or body is forgotten. It is a prayer full of propriety and decency. But I miss in it the sense of a divine presence, I miss the earnestness of the heart and flesh which cries out for the living God. It leaves us untouched and cold. Its letter is all right, but the spirit of prayer is absent.

And I have heard a prayer in which every rule of the English grammar was violated,— in which the nominatives had lost their verbs, and helpless adjectives were looking in vain for their substantives. But it was a real prayer: it was in spirit and truth. It was the voice of the soul, crying out of the depths to an infinite beauty, a divine tenderness. It was the lost child, calling for its Father. And such a prayer, from the lips of an ignorant slave or a sinner seeking pardon, has gone home to my heart, and lifted my soul to God. The letter of the prayer was poor enough, but the spirit of the prayer was after the mind of Christ.

Religion, more than anything else, must be judged by its spirit; for in this, most of all, is the spirit the essential thing. Its essence does not consist in opinions, ceremonies, the decrees of synods, the action of councils. The great confessions of the churches omit to state its vital power. Neither the Apostles' Creed nor the Nicene, neither the Westminster Catechism nor the Thirty-nine Articles, lay stress on love, which Paul says is the fulfilling of law, and greater than faith and hope, and of which John says that he who loves dwells in God, and God in him. They tell us what we must believe about the Trinity, total depravity, the atonement, the true church; but not one of them says: "We believe in the Divine Fatherhood and in human brother-

hood. We believe that we are to love God with all our hearts, and our neighbor as ourselves." But this is the real Christianity which is to save the world. This spirit, which sees that God is Love, as the beloved disciple testified; this spirit which, loving God, loves its brother also,— makes the true church of Christ, the invisible body of Christ, the hidden leaven which is the seed of progress and the hope of the future. Where this exists, in the church or the world, true Christianity is to be found. Where it does not exist, the churches may be outwardly prosperous and have a name to live, but are really dead.

All the arguments levelled against Christianity, from those of Celsus in the second century to those of Col. Ingersoll in the nineteenth, are directed against its letter; against creeds, forms, usages, the letter of the Bible, the externals, and unessential parts of the vast system. Who ever found fault with the divine spirit which has pity for the poor, compassion for the sufferer, comfort for the bereaved, hope for the sinner? Learned books have been written against the outward miracles of the Bible; but what book has attacked that faith in an Infinite Presence and a Fatherly love which has enabled those on whom life lays heavy burdens to bear their trials with courage and hope? Sceptics and scoffers love to detect the vices of professing Christians, the hypocrisy of venal priests; but who ever utters a word against the pure soul of Fénelon, the self-denying humanity of Livingstone, the philanthropy of Howard, the missionary zeal of the Catholics in Canada, or the Protestants who have changed the Fiji Islanders from cannibals to upright men and women? The most cynical infidel never opposes the spirit of truth, justice, honesty, charity, which go wherever the real spirit of the gospel goes.

Dr. Channing once said of poetry that its letter might be falsehood, but that its spirit is often the profoundest wisdom. So, in all religions, under every error and superstition, there lies hidden an original element of truth. It is not an inten-

tional falsehood, but a truth gone astray. It is a perversion or an exaggeration of some genuine experience. There was a spirit in the letter in the beginning, though it may long ago have left it.

Jesus says, "The words I speak to you are spirit and life." Therein is their immortal power. What a difference between living words and dead words; words which are empty repetitions of an old belief and words filled with a present sight of truth, inspired by a new revelation from heaven, glowing with knowledge fresh from the oracles of God! It is this immediate insight which gives authority to speech. When one whose soul is thus aflame with lofty convictions gives utterance to his thought, then truth itself seems to speak through his lips, and conviction follows his every word. And such words have an immortal youth. So live the words of Homer through the intervening centuries. So the song which came from the pale lips of Dante vibrates in human hearts to-day. What matters it that the letter of Dante's theology, and his pictures of paradise and hell, were based on superstition? The letter was false; but the spirit of justice, of human tenderness, of faith in absolute right makes his poem like Mont Blanc among lower mountains. It still catches the first gleam of the coming dawn, it still holds the last rosy flush of the dying day. And because the words of Jesus were inspired by still loftier realities, and are the outcome of a more profound insight, he could say, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." What a daring prophecy, but how sure to be fulfilled! Oblivion may sweep over all other literature; but I think that mankind, if it has forgotten all else, will still cling to the words of Jesus. When he uttered that wonderful prediction, his sayings were unrecorded. He gave no command to have them put into writing. They probably remained unwritten during the lifetime of that generation. Many, doubtless, may have been lost, and can never be recovered. But

those which remain are full of the spirit of Jesus, and it is this heavenly spirit that is of the chief value to us all. Paul said he did not care to know Christ Jesus after the flesh, since he had the spirit of Jesus formed within him, the hope of glory. The Church has been torn with controversy, futile and idle, in regard to the origin of Christ, his essential being, his relation to the substance of God. These questions belong to the letter which killeth. But he who knows the mind of Christ, he who has the spirit of Christ, belongs to him; and to him Christ belongs.

We walk by faith, dear Lord, and not by sight;
  We cannot follow where thy footsteps led,
Nor hear that voice of tenderness and might,
  The voice that calmed the storm and raised the dead.

Yet *had* we known thee, doubting and weak-hearted,
  With thickest veil of worldly thought between,
We might have stood aloof, or soon departed,
  And not *believed* that which our eyes had seen.

But, if we have not seen, and yet believe,
  A better blessing thy dear love imparts,
More than thine outward presence to receive,—
  To find thy spirit formed within our hearts.

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